

Runaway by ohmybgosh

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Depictions of Abuse, Prompt Fic, cause that's all i ever do, outsider pov, this is essentially just an ode to jim hopper

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Characters: Billy Hargrove, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Eleven & Billy Hargrove, Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

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Summary:

Jim Hopper just wants to find a Christmas present for his telepathic daughter. He didn't ask for all these extra teenagers in his home.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Prompt: "Billy runs away from home. Hopper entice him to the cabin with eggos (lol) and justice is served to Neil."

I hope this fulfills all your Eggo and justice needs! Thanks for the prompt, this one was fun to write :)

I'm not sure what street the Harrington house is on in the show, so I just picked one they referred to in s1, not that it really matters but oh well

December 17th, 1985

"Not right now!" Chief Jim Hopper called at the closed door. An insistent knock answered him. The blinds were down but he could tell it was Flo.

He glared at the Barbie doll on his desk, smiling at him from behind the sheet of plastic. Her tiny wrists and ankles were tied to the cardboard behind her like restraints; there was a maniacal look in her flat, painted eyes. He leaned back in his chair warily.

Sara liked dolls, he thought with a pang. She had been easy to shop for.

Eleven was a hard kid to Christmas shop for. What the hell did you buy for a psychic girl who grew up as a lab rat, without a mother, abused by her father, and forced to confront hellish monsters from another dimension? Revenge, probably, would suffice. But Hopper didn't think he'd find that anywhere, not even the giant aisles of the Indianapolis Macy's Department Store.

He hadn't checked there. But he had been doing a lot of research in his spare time, sitting on the old couch in front of the TV in the cabin, digging through boxes of Hawkins Lab files, while El curled up

under his mother's crocheted Afghan blanket, sometimes helping him while he simultaneously taught her to read, but more often than not watching cartoons and drifting off to sleep, drooling on his shoulder.

He asked Joyce for help with Christmas presents. She just smiled and kissed his cheek and said, "You'll think of something."

Flo pounded on the other side of the door. Jim flinched; for a 60 year old woman she had a lot of strength.

"What?" he shouted.

"Susan Hargrove is on the line!"

He stood, sweeping the Barbie into the trash. He'd have to do better.

He crossed the room and pulled the door open.

"What does she want?" He was wary; he'd heard a lot about that family from El's friends, one of her friends being from that family.

Steve Harrington had a lot to say about that family, too. All the past year, Steve Harrington had suddenly become much more involved in Hopper's life than Hopper had ever desired. Steve sort of stepped in as Dustin Henderson's older brother, picking him up and dropping him off and hanging out with him when Claudia Henderson, a single mom, had to work overtime. By proxy, along came Will Byers, whose mother, Hopper thought with a fond smile, also worked overtime every week but still used all her free time to be with her sons. Lucas Sinclair's and Mike Wheeler's parents didn't need extra help but their sons shoved their way into the back Steve's shiny BMW anyway. Max Mayfield's brother, Hopper knew because Steve Harrington seemed to think it would be interesting for Hopper to hear about for 20 minutes straight, always gave her rides wherever she needed to go. But she, too, frequently could be seen crammed in the back of Steve's car between her friends.

This was another thing Hopper didn't want, had never asked for. He supposed all these goddamn people came with El, and he was ok with being forced to interact with them if it made her happy. And it made Joyce happy, too. And they weren't that bad; he begrudgingly

admitted that he sort of liked all of them. But he'd spent a lot of time on his own before all these people came along, and now, on the weekends finding himself sandwiched on Joyce's couch between a bunch of teenagers, he got a bit of a headache hearing so many voices all at once.

And, for another thing, he didn't expect Claudia Henderson at all, who sometimes showed up at the station on her way home from work, a tupperware of cookies in her arms and gushing about how thankful she was for Dustin hanging out at Hopper's the evening before, or Hopper swinging by to fix a leaky pipe in their cellar (Steve, who couldn't seem to keep his mouth shut, told Mrs. Henderson at one point that Hopper was handy around the house).

He sincerely hoped Susan Hargrove, on hold on the other line, didn't have a leaky pipe or a million thank you's for whatever Hopper had done for Max.

"Says her stepson's gone missing," Flo whispered, hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone even though she'd already put the line on hold. "She's very distraught."

Hopper sighed. His gut started to twist, in worry, he thought, remembering Barbara Holland's corpse in the Upside Down.

The painful clench in his gut could've been from the burrito he'd had at lunch, though. The gate was closed, anyway, so, burrito was possibly the best answer.

"Thanks, Flo."

"Line two," she said over her shoulder, turning back to her desk.

Hopper picked up the phone.

"Chief Hopper."

"I need your help," Susan said hurriedly. Her voice sounded shaky on the other end.

So that was how Hopper found himself, driving slowly down the icy road, high beams on, searching for Billy Hargrove.

He'd stopped at the Hargrove household first, knocking firmly on the door, his customary "Chief Hopper" scowl on his face. That's what Joyce called it, anyway.

He put his hand on his holster when he heard scuffling from inside. He was wary, on edge.

On the phone, Susan said her stepson and husband had an "altercation". Hopper was all too familiar with that language, that tremor in Susan's tone. He spent all of his youth avoiding "altercations" with his own father.

The front door of the Hargrove's house swung open. It was him, *Neil*, he recalled.

He was small, smaller than Hopper expected, a compact man of average height, cropped hair and immaculate mustache that screamed military man.

He had the air of someone who was always put together. Though, in that moment, his neck was tinged red, a sheen of sweat covered his sharp face, and his tie was askew.

"Can I help you?"

"Chief Hopper," Hopper said in lieu of answering. He leaned around Neil, glancing around the house. "Your wife, Susan, called. May I speak with her?"

"She did," Neil repeated, not a question. He looked over his shoulder. "Susan?"

She came, looking much more disheveled than her husband. Her eyes looked red and her face lined with worry.

"Thank you for coming," Susan said in a rush. "Billy ran off and we can't seem to find him. It's just so cold outside." Her lip trembled.

"He's fine, I'm sure he just went for a walk," Neil assured her. His

voice sounded falsely sweet. He turned to Hopper. "Come in, if you like. But there's no need to worry, Billy's fine. Susan just gets worked up sometimes, you know how they can get."

Hopper narrowed his eyes. "No, I don't know what you're referring to, Mr. Hargrove." He edged past the pair of them and into the house. "I'll take a cup of coffee if you've got it. Mind if I smoke in here?"

He wiped his boots on the mat by the door and looked around the house. The house was small, modest. In the living room, *White Christmas* played on the television. A set of weights sat against the wall in one corner of the room. He crossed the floor, making his way into the kitchen uninvited. Susan followed hurriedly.

"We don't have coffee, I'm sorry," she said, lip quivering.

"Not a problem." Hopper smiled at her. He pulled out a chair from the kitchen table, sitting and taking out his cigarettes.

Susan sat beside him, wringing her hands together in worry. Neil sat on his other side slowly, eyeing him all the while.

"So," Hopper said. He lit his cigarette (Neil bristled) and sucked in slowly, exhaling and blowing the smoke out the side of his mouth. "When did you see Billy last?"

"He took off a little over two hours ago," Susan said, before Neil could speak.

"On foot?"

"Yes," Susan answered. She glanced nervously at her husband. "Billy has a car but, he's, ah, not driving at the moment."

Neil crossed his arms. Hopper got the impression that the keys to Billy's car were in fact in Neil's pocket.

"Did something happen to prompt Billy running away?" Hopper asked.

"He didn't run away," Neil said shortly. "I told you, Susan, he just went for a walk. I'm sure he'll be back soon."

Susan looked down at her lap.

“He wasn’t upset about anything when he left?” Hopper pressed.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. He’s an angry young boy, but we’re working on that.” Neil shrugged.

“Right,” Hopper said slowly. He took another drag of his cigarette, turning his head when a flash of orange caught his eye.

Max, El’s friend, peeked around the doorframe into the kitchen. She had striped pajamas on, her bare feet shuffling on the carpet nervously. Her bright blue eyes met Hopper’s and a silent understanding passed between them. They didn’t know each other here, not under this roof.

Max had spent a fair few nights at the cabin, sometimes with the boys but sometimes just her and El, giggling and speaking in hushed voices in El’s room, snacking on popcorn in front of the television and trying to convince Hopper to let them paint his nails.

“Go to bed, Maxine,” Susan said, following Hopper’s gaze.

“Are you here for Billy?” Max asked. She ignored her mother, and took a cautious step into the kitchen.

“Yeah.” Hopper nodded.

Max hesitated, glancing at her mother and stepfather. She bit her lip, looking anxious but determined.

“Try Dearborn Street,” she said. “He, um, likes to walk there, sometimes.”

“Dearborn,” Hopper repeated, nodding. “Thanks.”

“He didn’t take a coat,” Max continued. Her voice cracked and her eyes looked shiny. “It’s really cold, and he didn’t take a coat.”

“I’ll find him,” Hopper assured her.

Susan stood, ushering Max out of the kitchen and back to bed.

Hopper stood too, finishing his cigarette and going to throw it in the trash. He stopped, stared at the trashcan. The shattered remains of a coffee pot sat atop food wrappers and banana peels. He thought he saw flecks of blood on the broken glass. A bitter taste rose in his throat and he flicked the cigarette butt into the garbage.

“Mr. Hargrove.” He beckoned Neil over.

Scowling, Neil stood, chair scraping against the floor, and moved towards Hopper.

When he was a foot away, Hopper leaned in, pleased that he had to look down at Neil, getting grim satisfaction from the way Neil shrunk a little, beady blue eyes flicking from Hopper’s face to the gun at his waist.

“I’d advise you, Mr. Hargrove,” Hopper said slowly, drawing out each syllable with dangerous care. “Not to touch your son ever again. Next time I get a whiff of what’s happening in this household, I’ll come here and drag you to jail myself. I don’t need a warrant.” He added the last part when Neil opened his mouth to retort.

Hopper leaned away, turning on his heel and heading towards the door.

“Have a good rest of your night,” he called over his shoulder.

He slammed the door on his way out.

Now, in the warmth of his car, hunched over the steering wheel, driving down Dearborn and squinting around the snow falling steadily in the dark, he didn’t feel as domineering.

He felt cold, and sad, and it was getting harder and harder to breathe. He kept remembering when he was a seventeen year old, creeping around his own father sleeping in the easy chair, the beer bottles that got thrown at his head, the cackling of his old man as he shot his pistol at the ground, bullets at the heels of Hopper’s fast moving feet.

His heart was starting to thump wildly, and his head was starting to spin.

Cigarettes didn't help with this kind of remembering. He, therefore, felt a crushing relief when he heard his own name through the radio, Eleven dragging him back to the present.

"Jim." The car radio crackled to life and El's voice deadpanned through the static. His heart slowed a smidgen. He took a deep breath, focusing on the static and the sound of her voice.

A small smile crept its way across Hopper's face. Nowadays, El and Joyce were the only ones allowed to call him Jim. If anyone else tried they'd get a stern look and the threat of a large boot up the ass.

"What's up, kid?"

"Jim, what do you call a fake noodle?"

Hopper snorted.

He never, not once, regretted setting up the radio in the cabin, letting El call him whenever she wanted. He also knew she'd reach out to him in her unique way of communicating without the radio, so having it was just easier on the both of them. He got it so they could communicate easily, and it started out as a way for him to let her know when he'd be home and to check in, mostly at first through morse code, but slowly progressed into a means for El to request special groceries (chocolate chip waffles, comic books, coca-cola, etc.), or ask to have Mike and her friends come over, and now they'd finally reached the stage of using the radio for just plain conversing. El called to tell him about her day ("The mouse in the wall is loud, Jim. Really loud. I think he is lonely. I am going to see if he wants a Saltine." Long pause. "He did not want a Saltine, Jim. He tried to bite my finger and I think we should set him free.") or argue her pick for the movie they'd watch in the evening, which was almost always the same, (" *The Sound of Music* . I know you hate the music. But I don't. I like it. So I think we should watch it again.") or, like this particular evening, call to tell him a new joke she learned.

He knew the answer but he asked anyway.

"I don't know, El, what do you call a fake noodle?"

“An impasta!” she said, and he could hear her giggle from the other end of the line.

“An impasta,” he chuckled. “That’s a good one, kid.”

“I know.” She paused, the line crackled for a moment. “Home when?”

Hopper felt his heart constrict a little bit.

“Soon, kiddo, I’m sorry. Two hours at most. I just have a situation to deal with.”

“Situ-ation?”

“A bad thing happened at work.”

“Bad?”

“A boy ran away from home.”

“Why?”

“His father is,” he stopped, rubbed his eyes wearily. El could handle this; she’d understand. He didn’t have to explain it. That was what hurt the most. He wished she was a kid who didn’t comprehend abuse, who needed an explanation. “His father is not a nice man.”

“Like Papa,” she whispered, understanding. Hopper ran a hand over his face. He was so tired; his eyelids and his heart so heavy.

“Yeah, like Papa.”

“Find him?”

“I’ll find him.” He paused a moment, feeling his throat close and his eyes burn. “Hey, El?”

“Yes?”

He swallowed, willing his vision to clear. He took a deep breath, focused on the empty road ahead, the snowflakes that melted against his windshield.

“Tell me about your day, kid.”

She did, plowing on excitedly about the writing she'd been working on, and the chapter book she'd read through by herself. She told him all about Joyce and Will visiting, and how they made brownies together and she tried to save him one, Jim, she really did, but they were so good and now they made her stomach hurt.

He listened, smiling, nodding along and focusing on the sound of her voice.

She was telling him about a comic book Will brought over when he saw the shape, crouched at the base of the tree. His car inched passed a driveway; the huge house at the end had a few lights on upstairs, and somewhere in the back of his mind he registered the cursive surname on the mailbox at the end of driveway: *Harrington*.

"Hey, kid, I'll call you back in a minute," Hopper murmured, slowing to a stop a few yards beyond the house.

Closer now, headlights illuminating the shape, he could tell it was the kid, huddled at the base of the tree. Max was right; he didn't have a coat, just a long sleeve gray tee, some ripped jeans, and worn leather boots. He pulled his knees into his chest and wrapped his arms around himself, shaking in the cold. From several feet away Hopper could see the angry red bump under his eye and the dried blood on his cheek.

He flung the door open, nearly slipping on a spot of ice.

"Billy Hargrove?" he called. Mercifully, Billy looked up. His lips were blue and he couldn't seem to speak, mouth moving but no sound coming out. But he was alive, and that's what really mattered.

Hopper shrugged out of his winter coat, hurrying to Billy's side and throwing it around his shoulders.

"Can you stand?" he asked gently.

Billy nodded, rising unsteadily to his feet, trembling from head to toe. He stretched his arms, as if to see if he still could. Part of his hair stuck to the back of his shirt, frozen.

Once in the car, Hopper blasted the heat. He took his wool hat off, a

gift from Joyce, and handed it to Billy who crammed in on his head with stiff fingers. Hopper popped open the glove compartment and pulled out El's woolen mittens. These were another gift from Joyce, the same color and pattern as his hat. He and El both refused to wear them at the same time, unless of course Joyce was around.

"On my way home now, kid," Hopper said into the radio. "Bringing a friend."

Billy looked over at him, raising his eyebrows, but otherwise didn't react.

"A friend?" El asked after a moment, curious. "Which friend?"

"A new friend."

Billy didn't speak all the ride home, not even bothering to ask where they were going when Hopper turned down the narrow dirt road to the cabin. Billy blinked at the "No Trespassing" sign but didn't say a word.

He parked once he reached the spot, where the car would be hidden behind a copse of ice encrusted trees. The cabin could just barely be seen through the snowfall.

He hopped out of the car, beckoning for Billy to do the same. Billy followed, looking much warmer after the drive, his lips no longer blue and a hint of color returning to his cheeks.

Hopper started toward the cabin and Billy fell into step beside him.

"Watch the wire."

Billy stepped over it, glancing around nervously.

Hopper stopped at the door, knocked. He heard the locks clicking faintly on the other side. The door creaked open.

"Boots off," he said over his shoulder, stomping snow on the mat and stepping out of his damp boots.

Billy shut the door behind him, closing out the gust of chilly wind

that rattled through the bare trees. He froze when the locks slid into place seemingly of their own accord.

“Fuck,” he whispered, the first word he’d spoken.

Hopper rubbed his temples, irritated. He’d been planning on avoiding this, hoping to introduce El as his daughter Jane, and move on.

“Hello.”

Billy spun around.

El sat cross legged on the sofa, staring at them, head tilted to one side, a glass of chocolate milk with a curly straw in one hand, the fluffy teddy bear Mike had given her clutched in the other arm.

“You’re Max’s friend,” Billy said slowly. His gaze darted from El to Hopper, brow furrowing, looking stressed.

“Yes.” She let go of the bear, letting it fall in her lap, and pointed at Billy. “Max’s brother.”

“Step-brother.”

“No. Max said brother,” El said firmly. Her eyes didn’t leave his face. She took a sip of her chocolate milk, the brown liquid doing loop-de-loops in the straw. Billy looked a little frightened.

Hopper cleared his throat.

“How much do you know?”

Billy gave El another suspicious look, then turned slowly to Hopper. “About the monsters, you mean?”

Hopper sighed loudly. He’d have to have a talk with Steve Harrington, once all this settled over.

“That answers my question.” He started towards the kitchen. “Should get some ice on that eye. And boots off, please.”

He pulled open the freezer, taking out the one bag of unopened

frozen peas which had been in there, untouched, for at least two months now.

He turned back around, peas in hand. El and Billy still stared at each other, El on the couch, sipping her chocolate milk, and Billy by the door, boots off, slowly shrugging out of Hopper's coat.

"My mittens," El said after a moment.

"Are they," Billy said faintly. "Sorry."

He took them off, along with Hopper's hat, too. He hung the coat and hat on the hook by the door. He hesitated for a moment, then took a careful couple steps forward.

"Here you go." He stopped a foot in front of her and held them out.

El looked him over, eyes narrow. After a moment, she seemed to come to a silent conclusion. She smiled.

"You can wear them. Want some chocolate milk?"

"Ok."

Billy sat on the other side of the couch, still looking cautiously around the cabin. He didn't ask about the locks on the door. Hopper knew Steve wouldn't tell Billy the truth about El, no one would, they all understood the severity of that, even with the extra precautions Hopper had put in place they all still spoke in code to one another, making sure to call her "Jane" when anyone else was within earshot.

So he supposed that Billy was beyond the point of asking questions. If Steve told him everything about the Upside Down, than free-moving doors must've seemed rather tame.

Hopper picked up the phone book, flipping through until he found the number, and headed over to the phone on the wall. He was thankful when it was Susan who picked up on the first ring. She was relieved, then confused, when Hopper told her Billy wanted to stay at a high school friend's for the evening. He promised her again and again that Billy was fine. He was lying through his teeth about most of it, but he didn't care, hanging up as soon as possible.

He grabbed the Nesquik from the fridge, pouring a glass for Billy and wondering vaguely how on earth his life had turned out so strange, how he'd wound up living in this cabin, living a much different life than he had as a kid in the cabin, how he'd wound up with his new telepathic daughter making nice with the resident bad boy. He wouldn't trade it, his new life, but still. Strange.

He handed the glass of milk to Billy as well as the frozen peas.

El tilted her head, narrowing her eyes at the television, and it snapped on. *White Christmas* was playing. They put it on loop every year.

Billy's eyes widened at the TV, but he didn't say anything, just pressed the peas to his eye, and took a slow sip of Nesquik.

"Jim." El patted the space between herself and Billy. Hopper, shaking his head, bewildered at how normally El treated the current situation, grabbed a much needed beer from the fridge and squeezed in between the two of them.

"You have anyone you want to call?" Hopper asked Billy after a moment. He watched Vera Ellen spin on the screen, her dress swishing out around her along to *The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing*. El tapped her fingers on her knee; Hopper smiled, this was her favorite part.

"No," Billy said quietly. He adjusted the peas, pressing them into his eye.

"You sure?"

Billy nodded. Hopper wanted to tell him it was ok, that he didn't care, but he didn't, because the scared look on Billy's face said enough.

He'd call Steve anyway, he reasoned, when Billy fell asleep or got up to use the bathroom, whichever came first.

It turned out to be sleep. Billy, exhausted, having run away from home and spent two hours in the snow, started to drift off, empty glass of chocolate milk tilting in his hand and peas slackening in his

other.

Hopper shut off the television then, standing and stretching. El jumped up too, rushing to take Billy's glass and the peas, bringing both to the kitchen, setting the glasses in the sink and standing on her tiptoes to throw the peas back in the freezer.

"You can crash here tonight," Hopper said quietly, gesturing at his own bunk bed by the door. He grabbed his mother's blanket from the couch, tossing it onto the bed. Billy stood, rubbing his eyes blearily, and crawled into bed, jeans still on. He fell asleep almost immediately when his head hit the pillow.

Billy looked uncharacteristically small, curled up on the bed, fast asleep, Hopper's mother's ratty old Afghan thrown over his body. El perched on a kitchen chair beside the bed - she'd dragged it there, next to his head, and sat, staring firmly at the top of his curly, blond, mop of a head that poked out from under the blanket. She had that determined look in her eye, the one that meant Waffles for Breakfast Lunch and Dinner, the one that meant Extra Time with Mike, the one that meant monsters were going to get murdered and gates would be closed, the one that meant business, and "business" was code for El getting her way no matter who told her no.

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose. At least Billy was sleeping, now. He, Hopper, hoped El wasn't going to be friends with this kid now, another teenager to add to the mix. The others were fine, even Steve Harrington. They could be loud and obnoxious and sometimes Hopper had to take a handful of baby aspirin to handle them all being in his cabin, touching his shit. But they were alright. Underneath it all he did actually like them.

Speaking of Steve Harrington. Hopper slipped into the kitchen, picking the phone off the hook on the wall again, and glancing at the small list of numbers tacked to the wall beside the telephone. There were only seven numbers on that list; the first three were the most important: the Byers', Joyce's store, and the direct line to the Hawkins Police Department. The other four numbers, the Wheeler's, the Sinclair's, the Harrington's, and the Henderson's, were rarely if ever used, but still there in the case of a major emergency, in case the radios didn't work. There was a eighth number there, too, but Hopper

still couldn't bring himself to just make a new list, to cross it out, even. *Bob Newby*.

Looking away from the eighth number, Hopper ran a finger along the Harrington line, jabbing the numbers into the phone.

It rang three times before someone picked up.

"Harrington," said a gruff male voice, with sternness around the edges, as if it only got sharp when it needed to be, but there was always a hint of it in the tone.

Hopper had never met Mr. Harrington, only ever seen him in the grocery store or from afar at the gas station downtown.

"Hello, Mr. Harrington, this is Jim Hopper," he began as politely as possible, the cover story he and Steve had gone over ages ago (he had one with each member of their little end-of-the-world party) running through his mind. Before Mr. Harrington could ask, and Hopper heard the little intake of breath on the other line, he plowed on. "Everything's fine, no trouble at all. Steve's actually doing a sort of "job shadowing" project with me at the police department for school, he didn't mention it? Ah, well, anyway, he's got a paper due in a few weeks and left a message at the department asking a couple questions, for research, you know. Bright kid you got there. And, gosh, it's been such a busy day at the station, I just finally got off and wanted to call him back, make sure he has everything he needs." He stopped here, rolled his eyes at the ceiling.

"Huh," Mr. Harrington said. "Well I had no idea he was interested in your, ah, department. I'll grab him now."

Hopper heard the phone being placed down carefully, and then Mr. Harrington's voice, sounding far off, shouting "Steve!" Hopper didn't hear Steve's response, but he must've, because Mr. Harrington called, "Jim Hopper is on the phone for you. About your project?"

Hopper heard Steve then, the loud "Thanks, Dad!" and the sound of feet catapulting down the stairs.

Closer now, he heard Mr. Harrington again, asking quietly, "What's

this all about, Steve? Job shadowing a police officer? Is this something you're actually interested in?" There was the sternness, and Hopper recalled the look of Mr. Harrington's face at the grocery store and at the gas station, crisp button down shirts and ties, business man mustache with not a single hair out of place. He didn't know what Mr. Harrington did for work, something boring like selling model homes or machinery parts, but he knew it was a serious business, and he made a lot of money doing it.

"Not really, Dad," came Steve's response without missing a beat. "It's for Econ, we just got assigned different places in town. I was hoping we'd get to choose and then I could just go into work with you, but I guess they want us to "expand our horizons", or whatever."

Hopper heard Mr. Harrington chuckle. Hopper smiled, oddly pleased, proud, of Steve for committing their story to memory and playing it off so well.

He really was spending too much time with these damn teenagers.

"Hello, Chief Hopper," Steve said, voice much louder in the receiver. He sounded polite, probably because his father was still in earshot, but there was an edge of panic to his voice.

"Don't say anything out of the ordinary, just ask questions about the department or something. Everything's fine; El and I are ok," Hopper said quickly. He glanced over his shoulder, subconsciously checking to see that El actually was ok. She still sat at her post, but was staring at him from across the room.

" Steve? " she mouthed. Hopper nodded and turned back to the phone.

"Thanks for calling me back, I really appreciate it," Steve was saying on the other end. "I just had a couple questions about the, um, daily routine for you, I mean, what a typical day looks like for you."

"Nice," Hopper said, smiling in appreciation. The kids sometimes gave Steve shit for not understanding words they used or facts they spit out like the brainiac nerds they were. But Hopper thought Steve was rather quick on his feet.

“Billy Hargrove is here with us, at the cabin. His stepmom called the station earlier. Things got pretty bad at home and he took off. He’s fine, definitely exhausted and shaken up. I thought you should know.” He paused and he could hear Steve breathing on the other line, too quick, too shallow. Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling nauseous at the offer he was about to make. There was already one too many extra persons in his home. “You’re welcome to come see him.”

He meant it, but he prepared himself for the headache later.

“Thank you,” Steve said after a long pause. His voice sounded small, but it was steady. “Thanks, Chief, I, um, I really appreciate it. I’ll just get working on my paper now.”

“He’s out cold now, not sure how long he’ll be staying,” Hopper murmured. The thought just occurred to him. He hoped Billy had somewhere else he could go.

“Thanks again, I really appreciate it. Um, have a good night.” Steve hung up.

He showed up two hours later, knocking quietly on the door.

Billy still slept soundly on Hopper’s bed, one bruised arm dangling over the edge, his rough fingers brushing the hardwood floor. El, with a lot of coaxing from Hopper, had finally moved from Billy’s side. They sat across from one another at the kitchen table, drinking hot cocoa and playing battleship.

Battleship between the two of them could get rather loud; they were extremely competitive and both cheated viciously, moving their ships around when they thought the other wasn’t looking. This particular night, their game was subdued, not wanting to disturb the guest. But Hopper still caught El trying to peek at his board. And he was almost positive he had seen her tilt her head, a small smile on her face, and he had thought he heard the tiny creak of a plastic ship moving on it’s own, across the thin blue seas on her board.

El snapped her head up when Steve knocked. Her eyes sharpened for a moment, lips pulling together in concentration, and then the

deadbolt opened, the chain lock slid out of place, and the door swung open.

Steve stepped inside, stomping snow off his boots and kneeling down to pull them off.

“Hey,” he said quietly, meant for Hopper and El, but his eyes were locked on Billy, sleeping away on the bunk. “Thanks for calling.”

He started to the bed, slowly, unsure. He knelt down by Billy’s head. He carefully pulled the blanket back, and made a small sound, a sad little sigh that came from the back of throat. Hopper couldn’t see Billy’s face from where he sat, but he knew the bright red bump under Billy’s eye was probably purpling by now.

Steve gently pushed back the mess of Billy’s hair, leaning in to kiss his forehead. Hopper turned away but El stared, her head tilting to one side curiously.

It was a long moment before he heard the creak of the floor when Steve stood.

“Thank you,” he said softly, sounding choked up.

“Don’t mention it.” Hopper shrugged. He stood, picking up his empty mug and smiling down at El. “Wanna call it quits, kid? It’s getting late, and I think you won this round.”

“I sunk two ships, Jim. You sunk no ships,” she piped.

“Yeah, yeah you win,” he chuckled. “Go get your teeth brushed.”

“Billy sleeps here?” she asked, not moving.

“Yeah, he can sleep here. Go on, brush your teeth.”

“How long?”

Hopper sighed. “I don’t know, kid. Until we can find somewhere else for him. Now, teeth, please.”

Satisfied, El stood, picking up her cocoa mug and bringing it to the

sink.

“Hi, Steve,” she said as she passed him, holding up a hand. He smiled, giving her a high five. Hopper wasn’t sure when that started, or why it had, but that was how the two of them greeted each other every time.

“Wash your face, too,” Hopper called as El disappeared into the bathroom. He heard the faucet turn on and went into the kitchen, setting his mug beside El’s in the sink, and turning to Steve.

“Your parents know you’re out?” he asked.

Steve shook his head. “They were asleep when I left.”

“He can stay here tonight, until we figure something out,” Hopper said quietly, nodding over at Billy. Billy shifted slightly, gave a little snort in his sleep. Steve smiled over at him.

“Thank you,” he murmured again. Hopper, inwardly battling with himself, sighed after a moment.

“You can stay tonight, if you want.” He regretted it as soon as he said it, because Steve’s face lit up and he made a move like he was going to hug Hopper.

Hopper held up a hand in warning. “Tonight. Just tonight. Tomorrow I’m finding a place for him, if he can’t go home.”

“I understand.” Steve nodded vigorously.

“Good.” Hopper gestured at the bed. He knew Steve wouldn’t take the couch. “It’s small, but make yourself comfortable.”

He turned to go, towards the bedroom, giving Steve and Billy their privacy.

“Hopper?”

He glanced back at Steve, who was looking awkwardly at his feet.

“Yeah?”

“Um. How, how did you know? About us?”

Hopper snorted. It had been obvious, from the first time Steve talked his ear off about Billy and then the thousand times after that. Joyce knew too. She smiled kindly at Steve whenever he mentioned Billy, and confessed to Hopper one night, huddled together on the front steps of her house, sharing a smoke, that she had been having Will spend more time with Steve on purpose, hoping that Steve could be a positive influence on Will, who was grappling with his own sexuality. Hopper was pretty sure the kids didn't know, apart from Max. Will might've known as well, but Hopper couldn't tell. El knew, though. She was smart, sharp, and, after spending an evening at Joyce's house, the first time she actually hung out with Steve, she asked Hopper “Who is Billy?” when he picked her up late in the evening. Hopper told her, he didn't know much about the kid then, but knew who he was. And El nodded, sat back in her seat, and said matter-of-factly, “Steve loves Billy.”

“Good night, Steve,” he said as a response, and headed into the bedroom, flicking the light off as he went.

El was already asleep, curled up, cocooned under the blankets. He slipped in beside her, the mattress creaking, and closed his eyes, feeling the stress of the day finally drain away the last dregs of his energy.

As he drifted off, he heard hushed voices from the other room.

“Steve?” Billy asked blearily, finally waking, at the sound of Steve climbing onto the bed with him.

“I'm here,” Steve whispered.

That morning El and Hopper crept into the kitchen. He put on a pot of coffee while she sat on the counter beside the toaster, a box of Eggos on her lap and a large plate on her other side. She slowly toasted the waffles, taking them from the toaster and transferring them to the plate, then repeating the process, until there was a large stack of waffles on the plate, humming “*Maria*” to herself all the

while, grinning at him when he started singing along under his breath.

Billy and Steve, looking cramped but comfortable on the bed, Steve behind Billy, one arm pulling him close, huddled together under the Afghan, woke to the smell of syrup being poured over waffles.

The table was only built for two, so El led the two of them to the couch while Hopper leaned against the kitchen counter, drinking his coffee and slowly eating his slightly cold waffles. El kept glancing up at Billy, smiling, and after a while he smiled back around a mouthful of Eggo.

Billy went home that following night, and Hopper dropped him off, El in the back seat (she'd insisted).

He and Billy went to the door, while El watched from the foggy car window.

Neil was the one who answered.

Hopper didn't say anything to him, just stood a little taller, puffing out his chest, and patted Billy on the back.

"You have my number. Call me if you need anything."

Billy smiled, stepping inside, around his father, heading over to couch where Max sat waiting. He grinned at her, ruffling her hair when she said, "You scared me, asshole."

Hopper stood in the doorway a moment longer, glaring down at Neil.

They stood like that for a while, Hopper's eyes narrowing as the seconds ticked by. Neil finally backed down, scoffing, and backed away, easing the door shut.

Hopper smiled smugly. He got back in the car, letting El climb into the front.

"Billy's ok?" she asked.

"I think so," Hopper said.

“Can they sleepover? Max and Billy?” El asked. Her eyes were round, pleading. “Steve too?”

Hopper chuckled. “We’ll plan a night.”

El smiled, sitting back happily in the seat.

Hopper still wasn’t sure what to get her for Christmas. But he wasn’t too worried. He knew she liked sugary things, musicals, soap operas, and comic books. And she loved her friends fiercely.

Revenge was not the only option.

He had a lot to choose from, he thought.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Per request here is part two :) Featuring good parents and dancing. Also my head canon is that Billy, Hopper, and El are all really loud snorers, so just picture Steve slowly going crazy trying to sleep. As always, comments and kudos are treasured <3

Billy didn't realize he was on Steve's street until he looked up and saw the huge house at the end of the long driveway.

Shivering, he stared at the house. Lights were on downstairs. Mrs. Harrington's small shadow flitted about inside, looking like she was hanging up Christmas lights. Mr. Harrington was at the dining room table, sipping something from a glass and reading the Sunday paper. Steve's shadow passed in front of the kitchen window. Billy swallowed. Steve was washing the dishes.

When the wind died down for a brief moment Billy could hear *Deck the Halls*, the music just barely squeezing out of the closed front door.

He wrapped his arms around his middle.

He wanted Steve. That's why his feet carried him here. He wanted to curl up under Steve's blankets and smell Steve's sheets.

He couldn't knock on the door, though.

It wasn't as if he hadn't before; he spent a lot of time at Steve's house. Steve's Dad didn't like Billy, wrinkling his nose whenever Billy came around, and Steve's Mom just gave him this pitiful look. And the house - the whole house seemed to wrinkle its nose at him, as if it also pitied him.

His house was different. Tonight, it gave him a coffee pot to the face, a broken bedroom mirror, and his father's hot breath on the side of his bleeding cheek, his father's hand grabbing a fistful of Billy's hair

and yanking him from the door: "I'm trying to *help* you, Billy!"

His house pitied him, too. Susan stood in the doorway, shouting his name as he scrambled across the icy driveway. Max cried, holding onto her mother's hand and motioning for Billy to come back.

He turned away.

He stopped only a few yards from Steve's house. He wasn't sure if it was because he couldn't feel his toes anymore, or because his body wouldn't let him go too far.

He wanted Steve. But being in that house would make him feel worse. He wanted Steve where he, Billy, was comfortable; in his Camaro, in his favorite diner just outside of Hawkins, in San Diego in the sun.

Hopper found him later, how much, he wasn't sure. But he couldn't feel his fingers anymore and at some point he sank to the ground, half hoping he'd just freeze to death.

He felt as though he were floating through the Hopper's cabin that night, as if he disconnected from his body, disassociated, saw himself from three feet higher. His mind seemed to be lagging, as if it took a late bus, as if it were a skipping record - it kept going back, missing beats. He wondered if it was possible to have a frostbitten brain. Perhaps he was just tired.

When he woke in the cabin that night, finally warm, he felt a tall somebody crawling into the tiny bunk beside him. For a second, half asleep, he thought it was Hopper. But then he rubbed his eyes, wincing at the bruise, and felt familiar cold hands slipping underneath his shirt.

"Steve?" He asked. Was he dreaming?

"I'm here." Steve pulled himself close, his chest flush against Billy's back. "I'm here, baby."

"How'd you know where I was?"

"Hop called me." Steve paused. "Don't tell him I called him that."

"Oh." Billy closed his eyes. So Hopper did know. Steve wouldn't have told him. Neither of them told anyone. Except Max figured it out, putting two and two together. And Hopper, too, apparently.

"Can I stay with you tonight?" Steve whispered.

Sometimes Steve got insecure. Billy never asked what it stemmed from but he had a pretty good idea; he'd spent enough time with the Harringtons to know that Steve had been told on more than one occasion that he wasn't good enough. Steve worried that he was being too clingy, and Billy laughed at that, because he'd spent a lot of time not being held by anyone, and even the tiniest of touches from Steve were special. Billy liked Steve being touchy; he was still too nervous to ask to be held, and Steve held him without asking.

Sometimes Steve asked Billy, driving late at night or snuggled in his bed, "You still love me?" Billy turned his head to look at him, or rolled over, narrowing his eyes. "Of course I do." Steve laughed it off, said "Just checking." But there was always that worry in his deep brown eyes that made Billy's heart constrict.

Billy nodded, lifting the old Afghan blanket over his shoulders when it slipped. Steve settled in behind him.

"You snuck out?"

"Yeah. Hopefully the snow'll hold off until the morning so I can sneak back." Steve slid his hands under Billy's shirt. He flinched, Steve's hands and feet were always so cold.

"I should leave early," he continued, whispering in the dark. "Before they get up."

Billy stifled a yawn.

“Sleepy?” Steve asked, pushing aside Billy’s messy hair and pressing a tender kiss to the back of his neck.

Billy closed his eyes, finding Steve’s hand, under Billy’s shirt, flat against his stomach, and knitted their fingers together.

“Love you,” he murmured, and he didn’t hear Steve say it back, for he fell asleep right after.

When he woke that morning he knew he wasn’t in his own bed; the bunk was a bit stiffer, the blankets warmer, and Steve was snuggled in behind him, one arm slung over Billy’s waist and the other crammed underneath the pillow, half hard from a nice dream, making a soft pleased sound when Billy stretched.

They got up to the smell of Hopper and Eleven making coffee and waffles. After they ate Steve left, hurrying home before his parents woke up and noticed he was gone.

When Steve stood to go, he hesitated for a moment, eyes flicking over to El’s, who stared at him, slowly bringing a forkful of waffle to her mouth. Steve, cheeks pink, leaned in to kiss Billy softly on his lips. He tasted like maple syrup and coffee.

He left, waving to Hopper in the kitchen, and they heard the Beamer start up outside after a long moment.

Billy stared at the doorway, his own face growing hot, until he felt a hard poke in his shoulder.

“Huh?”

He turned and El pointed at his plate. “Finish that?”

“Go ahead.” He passed it to her and she smiled, picking up the whipped cream can from the coffee table and piling on top of the leftover waffles.

“Easy, kid,” Hopper said. He came to the couch, reached out and grabbed the can of whipped cream.

El glared at him, her eyes narrowing and nostrils flared. He glared right back, mirroring her expression. El let go after a second, grumbling, and picked up her fork, shoveling whipped cream into her mouth.

Hopper returned to the kitchen, tossing the whipped cream into the fridge.

“You can hang out here today, if you want. But you’ll have to help with the shoveling,” he called to Billy over his shoulder, fixing himself another cup of coffee.

“I want the roof!” El cried.

“You got it. I’ll take the pathway.” He turned, raising his brows over his coffee mug at Billy. “You can do the steps.”

“Um. Sure.”

It was settled. Billy hadn’t planned on staying here; he knew he wasn’t going home, not for a few hours at least. His dad always took a long time to cool off.

But he didn’t have anywhere to go. Steve left. He had no idea where they were, and he supposed he’d have to hitch a ride with Hopper whenever Hopper decided to go.

All bundled up, Billy shrugging on one of Hopper’s too big coats, they stood outside the small cabin a little while later, Hopper and Billy equipped with shovels, El with a tall hunting hat on her head, pointing excitedly at an owl in a tall birch tree.

She tugged on Hopper’s gloved hand. “Barred?”

Hopper squinted up at it. “Yeah, kiddo, you’re right.”

His hand clasped her shoulder and he smiled down at her. Billy felt a lump rise in his throat and he looked away.

“Watch this, Jim.”

El waded through the snow, facing the cabin. She took a deep breath

and raised her hands in the air, fingers spread wide a palms open.

“Might wanna back up,” Hopper said.

Billy took a hasty step back.

El closed her fingers, jerking both arms to the left, and a giant mound of snow slid off the roof, landing with a loud *thump* on the snow covered ground.

She grinned at them over her shoulder. A dark trickle of blood slowly ran from one nostril, contrasting with her pale skin.

“Cool,” Billy breathed. It took a lot less time than he expected to get used to El’s talent.

It took quite a few times, and confirmation from Nancy Wheeler in the form of photographic evidence, for Billy to believe Steve about the monsters. But it explained a lot, when he thought about it: Steve’s anxiety, the weird shit at the Byers’ house that night, the way Max sometimes talked to her friends - hushed, glancing over her shoulder to make sure no one was listening. So El’s whole telepathy thing was easy to accept, especially last night, when he was almost asleep and slightly delirious. And it was cool, very cool. Like Phoenix.

“Cool,” El repeated, nodding. She lifted her hands again, moving another heap of snow off the roof.

She moved the snow, another few times, until all that remained on the tiny cabin roof was a thin layer of ice.

“Nice one, kid,” Hopper said proudly.

El smiled at him, wiping the blood from her nose with the back of her jacket sleeve. “Now you shovel.”

Billy smiled slowly. He was starting to like this weird kid more and more.

They shovelled the rest, Billy shovelled great heaps of snow off the small porch and the steps while Hopper cleared a pathway to the cabin. El disappeared inside for a while, returning with her pockets

bulging, pulling out three cans of Coke.

Hopper looked up when she returned, wiping sweat from his forehead.

“You found it! I thought we finished the last case. Where was it?”

“Crawl space.” She cracked one open and took a sip. “Many spiders, Jim.”

“Yeah. Gotta take care of those webs soon.”

When they finished shoveling El tossed a can to Hopper and one to Billy.

“Thanks kid.” Hopper took a sip, closing his eyes and smiling for a minute. Billy noticed he only smiled at El. And Coke.

After chugging the can, Hopper crushed it easily and gave a satisfied belch. El giggled.

“Eight,” she said.

“At least a 9.”

“Not loud enough.”

“Got me there.” He tossed the crushed can to her and she caught it easily. “Alright, kiddo, what’s say we go take care of those spiders?”

El rubbed her hands together, a menacing glint in her eye. “I get to vacuum.”

Billy was definitely starting to like this odd little kid.

“Sure thing.”

Hopper led the way indoors, pausing to stomp snow off his boots, and El followed, tossing the empty cans into the snow-covered trash bin as she went.

Billy hesitated for a moment. He had nowhere else to go, he supposed.

He took his boots off inside and helped Hopper drag the vacuum out of a tiny closet. El bounced around beside them, wondering aloud what kind of spiders lived downstairs and whether or not they'd survive the trip up the vacuum cleaner.

In the crawl space there were indeed a lot of spiders. El jumped in first, scooting carefully around stacks of cardboard boxes, and Hopper squeezed through second.

"It's a little tight down here," he called, sneezing on a dust bunny. "Damn cobwebs. Can you plug in the vacuum and hand the tube down?"

Billy did, privately thankful there wasn't room enough for three down there. It wasn't that he was afraid of spiders. Just... Steve was the one who killed the spiders. Billy offered moral support, from at least five feet away.

He sat cross-legged on the cabin floor and held onto the old vacuum cleaner while it hummed loudly, spitting out a thin cloud of dust in the back. Down below, on his hands and knees, Hopper shifted boxes aside, sneezing and swearing, and pointing out spiderwebs. El wielded the vacuum tube, cackling with delight each time a fat brown spider's life ended abruptly, whooshing up the tube to die in a dungeon of dust bunnies and cracker crumbs.

Once the crawl space was successfully de-spidered, El and Hopper climbed out, shaking dust from their shoulders. They took care of the vacuum and Hopper wandered into the kitchen, sifting through the fridge to scavenge for food.

"Shit, I need to go shopping," he murmured. He pulled open the freezer, pushing aside the bag of frozen peas. "How 'bout chicken nuggets?"

"Yes!" El cried. She turned her owlish brown eyes to Billy. "Chicken nuggets?"

"Sounds good." He shrugged.

She grinned at him and darted off into her little bedroom.

Hopper turned on the oven, lining up frozen nuggets on a metal baking sheet, humming something to himself that sounded like *The Sound of Music* . Billy wasn't sure, he'd only seen that movie when he was very small.

El reappeared, carrying a small stack of comic books. She plopped down on the couch and motioned for Billy to join her.

"From Mike," she said when he sat down. She smiled, cradling the comics to her chest. "You like comics?"

"Yeah." Billy shrugged nonchalantly. Truthfully, he read a lot of comics as a kid. *X-Men* were his favorites. Something about all those mutants, misfits together, made him feel at home.

Hopper joined them, carrying a plate piled with a pyramid of chicken nuggets.

"Dig in," he said, sinking down onto the cushions. El sat in the middle, leaning in when Hopper stretched, tucking herself under his arm, and snatching a chicken nugget from the plate.

"Read this one." She held out a *Doctor Strange* , and Hopper, tossing a nugget into his mouth, flipped open the comic and started reading, pointing out words to El and having her sound them out slowly.

Billy grabbed a handful of nuggets and sat forward a bit, reading over El's shoulder.

After finishing three comics El started to drift off to sleep.

Hopper eased away, picking up the empty plate and tiptoed into the kitchen, flicking the TV on as he went; it was *White Christmas* again, they put it on loop every year. The voices on the television were low, and El snored in her sleep.

Billy followed Hopper into the kitchen, because he wasn't sure what else he should do.

"Hey," Hopper said quietly, turning to him when Billy leaned against the counter. "Have you thought about, you know, going home? Not that I'm kicking you out. You can stay a few more days if you need

to. Just, it's a small cabin for two people as is."

Hopper looked away, glancing over at El. He did that a lot, Billy noticed. Subconsciously checking on his daughter, as if to make sure she was still there.

"I'll go," Billy said. He liked it here. It was weird, but both Hopper and his daughter had a bluntness about them; neither of them were subtle with their feelings and they didn't waste time with unnecessary niceties. It was a good change of pace for Billy. He spent a lot of time sneaking around in his own home, pretending to be someone he wasn't, occasionally even with Max. But the two of them were getting better at that.

But he knew he couldn't stay another night. He didn't want to take up the Hopper's space, even though they offered it. It was also a little too painful, seeing the way Hopper treated El. It was a kind of love Billy hadn't seen for a long time, couldn't really remember anymore. He had forgotten what a good parent looked like.

"You going somewhere else?" Hopper asked. "To St- a friend's?"

"No." Billy shook his head. He didn't have any friends, nobody he wanted to stay with, anyway. And he couldn't stay at Steve's. "I'll go home."

"You sure?" Hopper gave him a strange look, and it wasn't until he thought about it later that he realized Hopper was concerned.

"Yeah. It'll be ok." It wouldn't, but he was used to that. And Max was there, which made it immensely more bearable.

"Alright. If you're sure." Hopper was still giving him that look, so Billy glanced away, biting his thumbnail.

"I can take you back tonight. We'll let the kiddo sleep. We can head out after dinner; I think the snow should stop by then."

They spent the next hour or so in relative silence. He helped Hopper fix the leaky shower head in the bathroom, passing over tools and

holding pieces in place while Hopper worked, occasionally offering Billy an explanation of what he was doing.

They finished the shower and moved outside, creeping passed the couch, throwing on boots and coats and going to the porch to fix the outside light.

When El woke, yawning and sitting up, rubbing her eyes blearily, they were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, Billy watching while Hopper slowly stitched a patch over a hole on a pair of El's jeans.

El went to the fridge, pouring herself a glass of chocolate milk, and wandered over to the table.

"There," Hopper said after a moment, tying a knot and tearing off the end of the string with his teeth. He held up the jeans.

"Fixed?" El asked happily.

"Should hold for a while." Hopper set them down, stealing her glass and taking a swig.

She snatched her glass away and stuck her tongue out at him, wandering back into the kitchen for more chocolate milk.

"What time is it?" Hopper asked suddenly.

El stared at the clock.

"Four," she said slowly, concentrating. "Twenty. Four. Four twenty-four."

"Shit, really?" Hopper snapped around to look at the clock. "Goddammit."

"Joyce?" El asked.

Hopper bounded into the bathroom.

"What's happening?" Billy murmured, standing up from the table to stand beside El.

El looked up at him. "Joyce and Will come for dinner tonight. Lasagna."

"Oh." He bit his nails, feeling suddenly self conscious. He knew the Byers' but mostly avoided them. He and Jonathan nodded politely at each other when they crossed paths, because Steve was their common denominator, but otherwise ignored one another. "Should I go?"

"Why?" El tilted her head at him, confused.

"I don't want to intrude."

"Intrude?"

"Oh, yeah. Intrude. It means, sort of, to crash your party."

El shook her head. "Not crashing."

"You sure?"

"Yes." El reached up, her small fingers closing around his wrist and he froze, halfway through worrying away his thumbnail.

"Bad habit." She tugged his hand away. "Papa said so."

"He's smart." Billy slid his hand from her grip, crossing his arms and sticking his hands under his armpits to keep from biting his nails again. He heard Hopper drop something in the bathroom, swearing.

"No." El tapped his side and he looked down. "Not Jim. Jim's not Papa."

"Oh." He wanted to ask what the hell that meant, the question was on the tip of his tongue. But then he glanced at her eyes, and there was something stony there, something hard in the thin line of her mouth and the set of her jaw. Something that felt familiar, something he felt in the permanent tenseness of his own shoulders.

Instead he nodded. "Yeah. Not Papa."

El stared up at him, unblinking. He cast about for another subject.

“Are he and Joyce...” he trailed off, gesturing at the bathroom door. Hopper was brushing his teeth.

El nodded, covering her giggle with her hand.

“Jim is *nervous* around Joyce,” she stage-whispered, drawing out “nervous” with extreme care, as if it was a new word, something she was testing on her tongue.

The bathroom door banged open. Hopper emerged, clean shirt on, hair combed back, a smelling strongly of cologne.

“I heard that,” he growled. He ruffled El’s curly hair when he hurried by, though, heading into the kitchen and frantically tidying up.

Two of the three Byers arrived a few moments later, knocking carefully on the door. Hopper spun around, looking lost, flattening his shirt over his chest. El tilted her head and the door unlocked itself; she wiped the tiny bead of blood away with her finger.

Joyce Byers was someone Billy had never met (he preferred to avoid all of Steve’s friends, because he didn’t want anyone assuming anything about him and Steve, and most of the smaller ones gave him the stink-eye anyway). He didn’t know what to think of her, first there was that night in her house, her house that looked like Jackson Pollock did Peyote and then puked crayon all over the place. And then there were her two sons, Jonathan who he knew and who was friends with Steve now, and the scrawny kid who stared at him with wide eyes. And then there was Joyce herself, whom he’d never spoken to, but whenever she saw him in passing (this goddamn town was too small) she smiled wide and greeted him by his first name.

Joyce, it turned out, was not a person he would have guessed on first impression.

She and Will entered the cabin, Joyce with oven mitts and carrying a foil wrapped pan of lasagna, shutting the door behind them. El darted forward and Joyce looked ecstatic, leaning down to kiss her forehead. El then threw her arms around Will, whose smile was just as bright and genuine as his mother’s, and he gave her a hug that was also somehow an enthusiastic pat on the back.

“Billy!” Joyce said brightly. “It’s good to see you! I’d hug you but my hands are a little full.”

Billy was usually good with moms, he could lay on the charm with anyone if he wanted to, but moms were the easiest. Joyce was an anomaly, though; he had no idea what to do with her.

“Um, I can take that for you, if you’d like.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful! Be careful, it’s just out of the oven.” She carefully passed the pan over along with the oven mitts.

“Smells good,” Hopper said, finishing wiping crumbs off the counter in the kitchen and wandering over to them.

Joyce greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. His face was pink beneath his beard when she pulled away.

El and Billy exchanged a look, El wiggling her eyebrows, and he turned away, fighting down a smile, and headed into the kitchen to set down the pan.

When he turned around he swore. El and Will were right behind him.

“Can you play Risk with us?”

“Um. What?”

“We, we need a third player,” Will explained quickly, stuttering just a bit and his cheeks going pink. “You can play with two, but it’s not as fun.”

“Ah -”

“Please?” El blinked at him. Her eyes were wide, imploring. Billy narrowed his eyes; he was reminded of Steve’s sad face, with his big brown eyes and lower lip pouting out.

“Sure,” he sighed.

“Oh, um.” The board was spread out on the floor in front of the TV, Billy and the two kids sitting around it, half-eaten plates of lasagna

on their laps. Hopper and Joyce were eating together at the table, speaking in hushed voices. Will leaned forward, holding up a finger. "You might not want to do that."

"Huh?" Billy paused, hand hovering over Madagascar, about to move his troops. "Why not?"

"El almost owns the coast of Africa." Will pointed out El's pieces, all the way from the Ivory Coast down and around to Somalia.

El nodded in agreement. "I will wipe you out."

"But. But it's Madagascar."

Will bit his lip. "I'm just warning you."

He lost spectacularly, El and Will cornering him in Norway.

He abandoned them for the couch, taking his dinner with him, and they started playing cards instead.

After dinner Joyce joined him.

"So what do you want to be when you grow up?" Joyce settled down into the seat beside him, handing him an opened Heineken while keeping one for herself. "Beer?"

"I'm 18," Billy said, sort of an answer for both.

Joyce raised her eyebrows at him. "You're gonna tell me you've never had a beer before?"

He couldn't fight down this smile.

"I thought so. You kids always forget I was in highschool, too. Right, Jim?" She turned, calling over her shoulder to Hopper in the kitchen, who was haphazardly stacking the dirty dishes in the sink.

Hopper grinned at her.

"Keg Queen, 1966," he said proudly.

Joyce turned back to Billy, glowing.

“You’re kidding?”

“Nope. Beat my ex boyfriend’s record by seven seconds.”

“Cool,” Billy’s said appreciatively, and he meant it.

“So what do you want to be?” Joyce asked after a drink. She looked at him with complete concentration, as if his answer was the most interesting thing. He got the urge to bite his nails; he couldn’t remember the last time an adult asked him a question like this. But El was looking at him from her spot on the floor, glancing away from Crazy Eights to listen. He took another sip of beer instead.

“I don’t really know,” he said. “I’m working at an auto shop now. I like cars.”

“That’s good!” Joyce’s voice was so encouraging. “You like cars. And what do you love?”

“I dunno.”

“Oh, come on. You’re just like Jonathan.” Joyce pouted her lip out, lowering her voice an octave in impression. “‘I don’t know. Photography, I guess.’ As if he doesn’t spend all this time taking pictures! You must love something.”

Billy swallowed. What did he love? Steve was at the forefront. Steve, more than anything. He tried to dig deeper. Max, though he’d never tell her that. Neither of them were good with that stuff. His mom. Her memory, at least. His dad, too, despite everything.

Music.

“Music,” he said quietly.

“That’s wonderful!” Joyce’s smile was bright and honest. He didn’t know how to respond to it, so the smile he gave back was weak. Joyce didn’t seem to notice.

“You play?” she asked.

“Um, a little. Piano. But we haven’t had one at the house in a while.”

That had been the first thing to go when Max and Susan moved in. His dad said they needed to clear space. He only ever played for Steve now; if he was in a good enough mood and if Steve used those puppy dog eyes than Steve could convince him to sit at the polished, antique upright piano in the Harrington's living room, the one Steve's mother sometimes played but mostly sat cold under a white silk sheet. It always took a few minutes for his fingers to work properly. But he'd never forgotten.

"Speaking of music." Hopper came out of the kitchen, beer in hand, and passed by, heading for the record player and big box of vinyl on the other side of the room.

He flipped through the records. "How 'bout a little Van?"

"Halen?" Billy asked, furrowing his brow. He didn't peg Hopper as a Van Halen fan.

Hopper chuckled. "No, better. Morrison."

Joyce grinned at Billy. "I bet I can guess what song he'll play. He says he's not a romantic. But you can always tell from the music people listen to."

Hopper carefully pulled out the record from the sleeve, placing on the turntable and guiding the needle down. He smiled when the song started, closing his eyes for a second.

El jumped up excitedly, grabbing Will's hand and dragging him up with her.

"*Hey where did we go!*" she belted. Will laughed, holding her hands, the two of them spinning in a circle. "*Days when the rains came!*"

Singing loud and out of tune, Hopper took Joyce's hand, pulling her up as she laughed.

He twirled Joyce around, still singing. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his smile was wide.

El and Coca Cola, Billy thought. *Van Morrison and Joyce Byers.*

El bound forward, grabbing Billy's hand and yanking him up so fast he barely had time to set his beer down.

She sang just as loud as Hopper, holding both Will's and Billy's hands. Will and El spun him in a circle, singing *Brown Eyed Girl* and laughing at the bewildered look on his face.

When the song ended, beer back in his hand, El tapped his shoulder.

"Does Steve have brown eyes?" she asked curiously.

Will snapped around to stare at him, eyes wide.

Billy choked on his beer.

Joyce and Will went home later, Joyce hugging El, kissing Hopper, and then hugging Billy, too, a long, warm hug that reminded him of his own mother.

Hopper followed them outside to see them off, gesturing for Billy to come with him. El stayed inside, flipping through the few TV channels for something that wasn't a Christmas movie.

On the porch, Hopper watched Joyce's headlights disappear down the narrow, snowy road. He took out a pack of Marlboro Reds from his coat pocket, offering one to Billy.

"You're brave," Hopper said after a moment. He lit his cigarette, cupping his hand to protect the flame in the wind, and took a long drag. "To go back home."

He offered his lighter and Billy took it slowly, staring at him.

"I'm not brave," he said after a moment.

Hopper raised his eyebrows at him. "No?"

"No." He glanced down at his hands, cold and stiff in the wind, lighter in one hand and unlit cigarette in the other.

Hopper didn't speak, just waited for him Billy to go on, and after a long moment he did.

"I can't live in that fucking house anymore." Billy lit his cigarette, inhaling deeply. The smoke burned the back of his throat, familiar. Hopper turned to him, looking thoughtful, eyebrows creasing together. He didn't say anything, though, so Billy plowed on. "I can't stand it. I feel - it's almost like the basement is on fire. And it's coming up the stairs, and I know it's there, I can feel it, I can smell the house burning. But I can't get out. I just keep waiting for the fire to come. I keep waiting, as if, as if I want to burn. But that's - that's not being brave. That's just, shit, I don't know. That's *nothing* . I'm nothing."

"You're not," Hopper said quietly.

Billy glanced at him, eyes narrowing.

"I know what you're going through," Hopper said.

"Stop." Billy clenched his fists. Everyone said that. Sometimes even Steve. *I know, I'm sorry* .

"I do." Hopper stared out at the falling snow, exhaling through his nostrils, tendrils of smoke swirling up and disappearing into the gray air. His jaw set firmly just like his daughter's. "My old man liked to play this game. See how fast he could get me to run. He had one of those cowboy revolvers, an old Colt .45. Like John Wayne. He wasn't a westerner, just pretended to be."

"Sorry," Billy said. It sounded feeble, but he couldn't find any other words.

"Thanks." Hopper took another drag from his cigarette. "You're not burning, kid. I know it feels like you're stuck there. And sometimes you think it would be so easy to give up. But you won't. You've got people who need you. And don't tell me you don't-" Hopper gave him a warning look when Billy opened his mouth to retort. "Steve needs you. Max needs you. And if you stopped being so stubborn, you'd realize you're not alone. We're here. Me and El, and Joyce and Will, too."

Hopper gave him a small smile. Cigarette between his teeth, he fished around in his pockets for a moment, hands resurfacing with a crumpled up grocery receipt and a pen. He scribbled a number on the back of the receipt and handed it to Billy.

"It's the number here," he said, nodding at the cabin's front door. "Call anytime. If I don't pick up leave a message with your number. El will call back when she hears it's you."

Billy swallowed. He looked away; he felt his eyes burning and he knew it wasn't from the biting winter wind.

"You don't have to -" he began.

"Just take it. You can rip it up when you get home - just take it so..." Hopper ran a hand over his face, looking weary. "So I don't worry, ok?"

He wouldn't meet Billy's eyes. Billy felt a little bit better at that. Hopper wasn't good at this either.

Billy slid the number into his pocket. He knew he wouldn't be ready to call for a while. But maybe sometime.

Three weeks later Billy and Max were in the dark at home. They couldn't afford the electricity that month and their parents left earlier that evening for dinner, about an hour before the lights flickered and then sputtered out for good.

"Where the fuck are the goddamn candles?" Billy grumbled. He sorted through the papers on his makeshift desk, random notes, diner receipts, checks from work, and leftover papers from school.

"I don't think they'll be there," Max said from his bed. She kneeled on top of the small twin, holding up a flashlight, the dim beam just barely reaching the desk.

"I'm not looking for candles." Billy picked up a receipt, squinting at it. *January 1st, 1:35 AM*. It was from the gas station convenience store downtown. He smiled. Drunk after New Years, he and Steve

stumbled all the way down town for coffee and potato chips. In front of the coffee machine, sipping on shitty gas station instant coffee, Steve pulled him in for a quick kiss when the cashier's back was turned. "Just wanted you to be my second one this year, too."

"Then what are you looking for?" Max asked. The flashlight flickered for a moment.

"Phone number," Billy said. "Aha!" He finally found it, Hopper's messy scrawl on the back of the receipt.

Just then the flashlight clicked off.

"Shit," Max whispered. She shook it several times, banged it against the wall. Nothing happened.

Billy took out his lighter. The flame flickered to life and he held out his hand.

"Come on."

Max tripped along behind him through the pitch black hallway, squeezing his hand tight, nearly cutting off the circulation, the only light the tiny orange flame he held in front of them.

"Who are you calling?" Max hissed when they made it to the phone, Billy pulling it off the hook on the wall, squinting to read the numbers in the tiny light.

"Hopper."

"What?"

He shushed her when it started ringing.

Hopper picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hey," Billy said, and winced, because he sounded awkward, and he wasn't entirely sure how to ask for help. "It's me. Billy."

"You ok?"

“Fine! Yes. Um.” He stepped around Max, who was trying to grab the phone out of his hands, whispering, “You sound so weird, let me talk to him!”

“This is a lot to ask but, um, so the power went off here. I think our parents, ah, forgot to pay the electricity and it’s pretty cold, and there’s no food because of the refrigerator, and Max hasn’t eaten, so, I was...” he trailed off, leaving the unasked question hanging.

“Hold on.” He heard a muffling sound, as if Hopper put his hand over the receiver, and then Hopper speaking, unintelligible. But the loud bang and the excited squeal of “Yes!” could be heard.

“Jesus, kiddo,” Hopper’s voice was back. “Hi. Do you remember how to get here?”

There was a pause, where Billy tried to recall, but he hadn’t exactly been coherent for a large portion of that night.

“Never mind.” Hopper took his silence as an answer. “Max will know how to get here. Just remember: after you turn off the main road onto the dirt keep going passed the signs. It’s about a mile in. Park behind my car. It’s icy so drive slow. Oh, and watch the wire.”